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A.

PAROCHIAL PLAN
FOR
AMELIORATING THE CONDITION
OF THE
LABOURING POOR.

"La base sacrée de l'esprit public c'est l'humanité."

L'Abbé COYER.



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A PAROCHIAL PLAN,

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THE Plan for ameliorating the condition of the labouring Poor, which I wish to submit to the consideration of the different parochial meetings of this country, is contained in certain resolutions founded on the natural and universal influence of rewards and punishments. Its objects are, by an active and steady co-operation, to promote the welfare of

the deserving; and, by a long-called-for vigilance, to check the destructive career of the worthless.

The depravity into which too many of the labouring poor have sunk—their idleness, deceit, drunkenness, and insolence—the impossibility of placing any confidence in them, is acknowledged by every one; and renders the most important and rational of occupations, (which, were it not for this cause, would also be the most delightful,) the pursuits of agriculture, vexatious, hazardous, and disgusting; and, by hardening the hearts of their employers, produces an adequate portion of misery among the poor themselves. If we inquire into the cause of this great public evil, we shall, I conceive, find it to be threefold: a want of attention to civilization; the

not making a public distinction between the good and the bad; and suffering the crimes of the latter to go unpunished.

What a humiliating picture of human nature do even the better sort of these neglected creatures present! those who are called hard-working men, whose industry wants the rein, not the spur. Worn with toil, their sole reward is rest; their coarse food, unaccompanied by the cheering hope of future amelioration, unseasoned by the kind attentions of that community to whose wants their exertions are devoted, scarce repairs the waste of constant fatigue. Thus, we see them, at an early age, shrunk in their limbs; their faces disfigured by furrows, dishonourable, not to them, but to those who have it in their power to make their labour lighter.

Shut out of the pale of civilization, enveloped by the darkest ignorance, they perceive no object of relaxation but the ale-house, (they have no other resource.) To this ho-bed of evil, therefore, their intervals from labour are too often dedicated, where, if they escape contamination, they become torpid ; and where the ill-inclined are completely brutalised. Where is the intelligence, the soul that constitutes a rational creature ? Were we to take man by this sample, we must admit the truth of the philosopher's definition, and allow him to be nearly a two-legged animal without feathers ! It is time our efforts should be directed to the amendment of this disgraceful portrait ; a work of time indeed, but by no means an impracticable one. As one step towards extricating these men from so degrading a state, from

which nothing good can reasonably be expected, and restoring them to their rank in the scale of beings, I shall propose to give premiums for the encouragement of common learning; and though some persons are still so astonishingly prejudiced as to assert that reading and writing promote wickedness in the lower orders of people, I will defy the first scholar in the world to be more crafty, insidious, lazy, and difficult to deal with, than that humiliating object, an unlettered clown. And here experience has happily set us right: for in those countries where education has been generally diffused, the working people are allowed to be the most orderly, industrious, and honest, of any in Europe; witness Switzerland, Scotland, and America. By this means, the door would be opened to useful information, as well as to harmless

and rational amusement. The first principles of mechanics, for instance, might be easily introduced, (so necessary to the operations of husbandry, as well as to almost every accommodation we enjoy,) of which, at present, if I may use the expression, they have a knowledge by contraries ; even the wheel and the lever they employ in every direction but the right. This idea has the sanction of many of the most enlightened men in this country, of whose institution for promoting mechanical knowledge* the reader is doubtless informed. But if this part of my plan had no other effect than to keep the labourer from wasting his health and money as he now does, it would form an object of sufficient magnitude.

* This was written before the plan of the Royal Institution was wholly developed.

Having mentioned the above Institution, I cannot refrain from paying this tribute of respect to the man who, enjoying the favour of a benevolent Prince, employs his influence, not in the gratification of senseless vanity or cold ambition, but, with true magnanimity, directs his arduous exertions to the public good, and particularly to the comfort of that class who, poor and friendless, can return him only their prayers and gratitude.

When authors confined themselves to metaphysical syllogisms, and barren controversy; when they buried themselves in the rubbish of antiquity, instead of clearing the way to its valuable relics; when they pretended to frighten men into a love of God, by giving him the attributes of a devil, by blasphemous

threats of hell-fire and everlasting torments; when whole libraries contained little more than a repetition of such execrable nonsense; it might be a question, indeed, whether reading could be of any use at all: But, now that the circle of literature extends to those subjects, upon a right knowledge of which, the comforts, the real enjoyments of life depend; when the useful arts are taught without the affectation of mystery, and important truths are rendered easy of comprehension by pleasing and familiar imagery; when practical morality is drawn forth from that labyrinth in which the hypocritical writers of the darker ages had so long confined it, and, freed from the clogs which disfigured it, is seen with all the attractions of its innate beauty; now that science and philanthropy unite for the instruction of mankind—to keep such wholesome food

from minds that stand so much in need of it, is a barbarous, selfish, narrow-minded policy.

The next point we have to consider is the necessity of a public distinction between the good and the bad, with respect to whom there prevails a truly levelling system: many a generous spirit is kept down, and pines in the general obscurity; the man of sense is confounded with the fool; the man of good manners, with the brute; the honest man, with the knave. I say that these characters are undistinguished; for, though the honest man may receive an extraordinary nod, or even an occasional bounty, the public, the only certain and permanent source of honour and reward, is silent: and here it is proper I should take notice of the material difference between public and private remuneration.

It is one of the paradoxes of human nature, that man, a *soi-disant* reasonable creature, should receive pleasure from any act that debases his species. Yet, such is his inconsistency ! an artful tale, told in a bondman's key, flatters his conscious littleness ; so that, as with the wretched Sofia, the true Amphytrion is he who gives the dinner ; the proud man, inverting the rule, finds that he is the true object of charity who bends the lowest.

A doctrine has, of late, been held by the over-zealous writers of the day, which strikes at the root of all honour, morality and religion. It attempts to inculcate what it calls an humble demeanour among the *poor* towards the *rich*—not the wise, the virtuous, but the *rich*! On what ground has effrontery dared to erect this altar

to Mammon ? Indignant, when we behold the splendid car of folly, the blazoned strumpet, the embroidered idiot ; the palaces of rapine, fraud, hypocrisy, will they teach us to reverence wealth as a duty ? Shall we not rather be taught to despise it, when we see that Providence, in derision of its vanity, throws it to the vile and impious ; pours it with profusion into the lap of meanness, imbecillity and pride ? In the faces of its slaves we read its nothingness ! Are there not qualities within the poor man's reach, that overbalance all the gifts of fortune ? Are not fidelity, kindred affection, industry, urbanity, (virtues essential to the happiness of mankind, to the existence of society—virtues independent on wealth and power;) are not these the qualities that God himself points out to the veneration of man ?

Let, then, the lesson of humility be read to the haughty and overbearing: emboldened by a conscientious discharge of the duties of his station, let the poor man measure his respect, not by the wealth, but by the worth, of those around him; and, indifferent to the transient ills of life, from a perfect resignation to the dispensations of Providence, fear not the machinations of his enemies, however powerful they may appear. For what harm can happen to him who has the Almighty for his friend !

“ He who can curb the fury of the waves,
 “ Knows how to blast the plots of wicked men:
 “ With reverence submitting to his will,
 “ I fear God, dear Abner, and know no other fear ! ”

Racine.

Let this sublime sentiment sink deep into his soul, and inspire him with confidence.

To return from this digression. Even the benevolent man is subject to caprice. At the time of the greatest need, he may not be in the giving vein perhaps ; and however well disposed, it is impossible but that he must frequently be imposed upon, and distribute his favours to the basest of the undeserving *. Private charity wants a guide : and that guide should be the public voice ; for the public, seeing with many eyes, and being exempt from individual captiousness, easily discerns the right object. It is a part, therefore, of my plan, to select the persons thus pointed out, in order to

* This objection, of course, does not extend to those cases which come within a man's own knowledge, in which there can be no doubt ; but they are, comparatively, few ; and to them the hazard of caprice applies. Generosity, also, naturally avoids ostentation ; but the reward of merit should have the utmost publicity.

confer upon them proper distinctions and rewards.

It may possibly be said, that these people would be insensible of such notice; that they are paid for their labour, and taken care of in cases of extremity.— That they are very sensible to what they conceive to be an indignity, we must all have had opportunities of observing; and that they are insensible to favours, he must know but little of human nature who can suppose. The springs of action are the same in all ranks of men; they are only more or less compressed: this has been proved wherever a liberal experiment has been made. But, in fact, in most of these plans there has appeared such a costive generosity—the reward has been alloyed with so many conditions, such very close re-

strictions, that it has shown more like an insult to poverty than the homage due to merit. As to their being paid for their labour, so are all the servants of the public; yet it is thought expedient, when they shew uncommon zeal and activity in their stations, to reward them, not only with high dignities, but with great pecuniary gifts. They are taken care of, indeed—as horses are, and other cattle—but not as men should be; the distinguishing faculty is left to take care of itself. I am not asking for a peerage, or a pension of 6000l. a-year; but, in every condition of life, some spirit-stirring honour should await the man whose conduct is eminently indicative of superior worth.

It is not uncommon language, yet surely it is in every respect impolitic, to say, “If you are such a clever fellow,

get into a better situation ; leave the plough to the clown." This is perpetuating the evil. The point should be, to make the better man contented with his situation, not to drive him out of it ; and this can only be done by making him sensible that it is an honourable one, by shewing him that the community appreciates his worth, and is eager to reward it. But, again, it will be said, perhaps, that these superior characters are not to be found among the class in question—that poverty effectually damps this glowing spirit. It must be granted, as a general observation, to which, however, there are many noble exceptions, that excessive wealth and extreme poverty are equally inimical to the native energy of the mind : if the one intoxicates, the other paralyzes. But though the frenzy of wealth be incurable, it is

not so with the languor of poverty: generous attention, timely assistance, and liberal treatment, will restore the mind to its wonted tone. It is no unweighed assertion, no poetical fiction, to say, that “an honest man’s the noblest work of God.” The more this truth is investigated, the more evident it will appear; for real honesty comprehends every virtue. Let us, then, have the merit of bringing forward, and paying due respect to this invaluable character. Rare it is, indeed; for honesty is too often made a mere word, interpreted as it may suit convenience. I have dwelt upon this topic, because it is indispensable to reformation that the feelings of honour should be roused: surely nothing but baseness can be expected where they are suffered to lie dormant.

I come now to that part of my plan, which I should propose with reluctance, did I not know that without it every attempt to reform would prove abortive : I mean the punishment of the vicious. We have hitherto, to borrow an appropriate expression, made a scarecrow of the law, setting it up to frighten birds of prey, and suffering it to keep one form till custom has made it their perch and not their terror. It is, however, in the certainty and celerity of punishment, not in its severity, that its efficacy consists. It is not my intention to recommend puritanical rigidness. It would ill become us, with all our follies on our heads, to exact immaculacy from the uncivilized and ignorant. Far is it from my wish to treat with rigour venial failings : I would strike only at those vices which are evidently the offspring of in-

nate depravity—that are fatal to the dearest interests of society.

Of the three principal vices which disturb the social order, particularly in the lower sphere of life, two are cognizable by the law : the third, though the greatest, can only be checked by the marked abhorrence of the community. These vices, I think it will not be disputed, are, habitual drunkenness, theft, and calumny. The first unsuits a man for all the duties of life : the next renders every comfort precarious : the last involves all the infamy by which human nature is degraded ; envy and malignity are its motives ; fraud and falsehood, its weapons ; and cowardice, its shield : its mischiefs are incalculable, for it works unseen. Where this rank and poisonous weed takes root, in vain you will seek

the fruits of honour. Sorry I am to say, that this detestable propensity prevails among the multitude in the most pernicious degree: a trivial offence, some pique, a matter of jealousy, is sufficient to set the tongue of slander at work; and not only their employers, and persons in higher situations, are its objects, but they use it equally to undermine one another: dissentions, enmity, and the ruin of the innocent, are the fatal consequences. In examining into characters, therefore, this is a matter of the first consequence, and should have all the punishment that opportunity will afford. Against other enormities the just laws of the country have amply provided; and the neglect of them is not only an affront to the legislature, and an immediate injury to society—but it fills the heart of the worthy man with de-

spair, who sees villany triumphant,
and honest industry unregarded.

It is a prevalent error, that tyranny is to be found only in palaces and great houses. The fact is, that civilization, or, in other words, common sense, has so far prevailed in those regions, that tyranny and oppression are out of fashion*, and have given place to a philanthropy productive of true happiness, whose beneficence, as I have already observed, only wants a guide. From the cottage —from the alehouse, the undisguised tyrant is seen to issue; and against his detestable attempts to disturb the peace

* It must be observed, that there is a great difference between those airs of imaginary consequence; that arrogance, which, contemptible in itself, and occasioning the forfeiture of all claim to respect, proceeds rather from a weak head than a bad heart, and positive tyranny and oppression.

and endanger the safety of the well-disposed, let the laws be enforced for protection.

On the grounds now stated, I beg leave to propose the following Resolutions, which, on their adoption, (with such modifications as in different parishes may be proper,) it is intended should be printed, and conspicuously posted up.

At a meeting of the inhabitants of this parish, to take into consideration a plan for bettering the condition of the labouring poor,

Resolved, That it is the opinion of this meeting, that the hardships of the poor arise in a great degree from the want of a *public distinction* between the good and the bad: And,

From the neglect of enforcing the laws

of the country against the offences of the latter,

Resolved therefore, That a committee of nine persons be appointed, to inquire into the characters and general conduct of the labouring poor of this parish.

That the said committee do point out, at the annual meeting of the parish, those meritorious characters, who, by a manly readiness and unimpeached honesty in the performance of their engagements with their employers, deserve well of the community *.

Resolved, That the person who shall appear to be the most industrious, honest and skilful in his occupation, and at the same time the most civilized and exemplary in his general conduct, shall be pre-

* It must be observed that benevolence, which has hitherto been without a guide—its effusions consequently checked—will, by this means, be enabled to dispense its bounty without the fear of encouraging the worthless.

fented with a purse of ——, together with the thanks * of the said inhabitants; and that the person so distinguished, with others of estimable character, be invited to dine with the parish on the above-mentioned day.

Resolved, That when, by age or infirmity, any deserving object shall be forced to seek an asylum in the poor-house, the committee be requested to see that particular attention is paid to his accommodation and comfort—an attention which is due from society to those persons who have faithfully performed the duties of their station.

* *Form of Thanks.*

At a numerous meeting of the inhabitants of the parish of ——, held on the —— day ——,

Resolved unanimously, That the thanks of the said inhabitants be given to *A. B.* and that he be presented with a purse of ——, in acknowledgment of the service he has rendered society, by persevering in a course of honourable industry, and setting a valuable example of integrity, sobriety, and good manners.

Resolved, That the said committee be authorised to afford assistance to, as they shall see occasion, and in every respect to promote the welfare of, the industrious and well-disposed.

Resolved, That —— be given to the parents of those children, the care of whom promises to give the best and most useful members to society.

Resolved, That —— be given to the best ploughman, —— to the next in merit.

Resolved, That —— be given to the man who shall make the greatest progress in reading and writing, —— to the next in merit.

Resolved, That —— be given to the person in whose dwelling, &c. the greatest attention to cleanliness and neatness shall be observed, —— to the next in merit.

Resolved, That where a disposition to reform shall appear, the committee be requested to observe it with a watchful eye,

and, being convinced of its sincerity, give it every encouragement.

Resolved, That all persons be invited to assist in making known such of the poor as shall signalize themselves by their good conduct.

AND whereas the just laws of England, the guardians of liberty, have amply provided against the oppressions of those malignant beings, whose depraved natures lead them to injure others, who, making idleness their boast, and base deception their glory, are not content with escaping the punishment due their infamy, but endeavour, by insults and seduction, to impede the freedom of action in those who are of better dispositions than themselves :

Resolved, That the said committee be earnestly requested to pass by no opportunity of prosecuting, according to law,

All persons who shall commit depredations on the property of others ;

All persons who shall wilfully leave their work, at any time, contrary to their engagements ;

All persons who shall not properly attend to their horses and carriages on the public roads, or who shall in any way interrupt the freedom and safety of travelling ;

All persons who shall be found abroad in a state of riotous intoxication ;

All victuallers who shall permit drinking in their houses at illegal hours.

Resolved finally, That as it is the determination of the inhabitants of this parish, to shew due respect to, and, to the utmost of their power, to promote the happiness of the worthy and industrious, so are they determined to repress the licentiousness of the vicious—of those mean spirits who would be supported by the labour of others, and who, inhumanly leaving their families to misery, spend their casual earnings in drunkenness, backbiting, and

blasphemy, to the great annoyance of their neighbours and discredit of the police—who, in every thing mistaking what is brutal for what is manly, become the disgrace of human nature.

Though there are few districts, I apprehend, in which this measure might not be successfully introduced; those parishes are particularly well calculated for it, which are sufficiently populous to secure a freedom of action; without which it is impossible to judge of the motives of men's conduct, unlike those remote and confined places, where the will of the great proprietors cannot easily be resisted, and which at the same time are not so extensive as to throw the object to too great a distance—where it is easy, by a united vigilance, to ascertain the facts required.

Though I have proposed that the Committee should consist of nine persons, in order, *pro forma*, to include the parish officers; it is impossible that they should have time to enter into that minute investigation of circumstances so necessary to the success of the plan: the usual routine of parish business, added to their private concerns, must keep their hands full. We are sufficiently obliged to them already: and when such formidable adversaries are to be encountered as ignorance, prejudice and rascality, a regular corps alone is not sufficient; we must have the enthusiasm of volunteers to make any impression.

In these resolutions, I have left an opening to reformation; an important point, which individuals cannot with safety sufficiently encourage.

The introduction of some of the meritorious characters among our labourers at the annual festival of the parish, would tend to remove the barrier that now keeps them in total seclusion from civilized society, and consequently lessens their interest in the general good, as well as our claim to their gratitude ; and would shew them that integrity and worth, in every station, are entitled to attention and respect. The old objection, that civilizing these people would make them discontented with their situation, might have had some plausibility a hundred years ago ; though it almost amounts to a contradiction in terms : it is equivalent to saying, that the more comfortable and respectable their situation is made, the more dissatisfied they will be with it ; but that, letting them understand it to be so very

despicable, that, could they but read and write, it would be utterly beneath them, is the only way to make them perfectly contented with it. Human nature is perverse enough, certainly; but not to this pitch. Let it not be imagined that this would encourage coarse familiarity and impudence. No one can abhor impudence more than I do. But merit is not impudent. It is the servile wretch who is impudent, in exact proportion to his servility, when he thinks he can get nothing by fawning. But a manly freedom of speech must always be pleasing to a liberal mind.

In proposing to pay extraordinary attention to deserving objects in the poor-house, I beg it may be understood, that I by no means wish to lessen the general comforts of the place, but to *add* to

them in particular cases. The time is past for casting a man's offences in his teeth when age and misery have laid him at our feet. Nor would I, in any case, inflict punishment from the mean motive of revenge, but solely with a view to prevent a repetition of the crime in the object of it, and to deter others from incurring it.

If I have spoken of the mischievous tendency of public-houses, I am ready to make every allowance for the conduct of the keepers of them, who, like other people, considering only their own interest, naturally sell as much liquor as they can. But they should consider also, when they enter into that line, that it is under certain legal restrictions, which they cannot honestly violate; but indeed the laws are so seldom put in ex-

cution, that they may well be allowed to doubt their existence.

One of the offences I have noted, may not, at the first view, appear of so serious a nature as it really is : I mean the conduct of the drivers of carriages. Yet I should think, did I not find the practice still unchecked, that the many vexatious and afflicting accidents which daily happen, must have awakened a sense of the atrocity of these fellows. If only the consequence of the fright which a narrow escape occasions, particularly to females, be considered, it were surely enough to call our attention ; and why are we so quiescent ? Is it to indulge the sport or laziness of a malicious brute ? But I trust a stop will be put to this dangerous and disgraceful nuisance.

If, after all, it should be coldly said, “Here will be a great deal of expence and trouble, and what good will arise from it?” I shall answer, that till the foundation is laid, the superstructure cannot be raised; that, to use a very homely proverb, Rome was not built in one day: but if, laying aside all selfish views, a hearty and steady combined exertion should take place, I have not a doubt that a material change for the better would in a short time be apparent. If still some Shylock should retort, “On what compulsion must I do all this? I cannot find it; 'tis not in the bond.” Alas! 'twere vain to argue with the Jew. Human Nature would have escaped half her obloquy, had she not given birth to that greatest of all monsters, a man without the feelings of humanity! But I am happy in ob-

serving, that a disposition friendly to the cause of the poor manifests itself throughout the country, and will not, I am sure, admit the uncertainty, if it exists, of being able to effect all the good it could wish, as a sufficient reason for not attempting to do any at all. With regard to expence, if I ought not rather to blush at mentioning it when the greatness of the object is considered, I might demonstrate the economy of the plan. Let it be recollected how easy it is for a few dissolute fellows, by throwing their families on the parish, to bring upon it a much heavier expence than would be incurred in putting a stop to such practices. It is indeed evident, that in the proportion you promote the comfort of the poor, you will lessen the charge of maintaining them; for as it is from their misconduct that that charge

principally arises, and as it is certain that happiness and villany can never exist in the same person, it follows of necessity, that, in introducing happiness, or content, which is its other name, you in the same degree destroy its opposite, vice, and consequently the expence attending it. Neither can you make one man happy alone: for happiness is of a diffusive nature; it propagates itself: and as it is the nature of baseness to plot evil, so it is the characteristic of happiness to work the good of all around it. Thus it is clear, that, instead of an accumulation of expence, a very great saving would ultimately be made; our money would be laid out at usurious interest; and I must add, that unless some strong measures are adopted, as well to punish the bad, as to encourage the good, the expences of maintaining

the poor will, in all probability, increase to a serious amount. It is at our option either to supply our fields with faithful workmen, or to fill our roads and villages with footpads and house-breakers.

Trouble there certainly will be, and a very great degree of trouble, if it must have that name, in effectually executing my design: we are ready enough, however, to toil night and day when the most paltry self-interest is concerned; and will the reflection, that the well-doing of so many of our otherwise forlorn and friendless fellow-creatures is in our hands, fail to stimulate us? Shall the cry of, Self! self! self! never cease to delude us? I do not wish to affect the moralist; but I cannot help saying, that however easy we may think it by professions and ostentation to deceive one

another, it is incomprehensible to me by what ingenious deception we can persuade ourselves, that, on any other ground than an unremitting attention to the happiness of others, we may rest *our* claim, either here or hereafter.

THE END.
